

MORDRED: FROM TRAITOROUS SON TO PRODIGIOUS CHILD-DRUID

Ana Rita Martins

ABSTRACT: A character of Arthurian legend, Sir Mordred, King Arthur's nephew and son, is one of the most famous villains of European imagination. His reputation, though, has not always been so bad. In fact, it was only in 1136, in *Historia Regum Britanniae*, that Geoffrey of Monmouth identified Mordred as the traitor behind Camelot's destruction and Arthur's death. However, Monmouth still depicts Mordred as the King's nephew. The *Vulgate Cycle* first introduced the idea that Mordred is Arthur's son with one of his sisters. Soon, Mordred's wickedness would be explained by the immoral union he was born from, but can Mordred's behavior be accounted for by the circumstances of his birth? Starting by analyzing key medieval texts, this paper aims at examining Mordred's infamous history and work out how and why he has been described as a villain. In addition, attention will be paid to modern adaptations. What has changed when it comes to depicting villains? What medieval characteristics (if any) have been kept?

Keywords: Medieval English literature; Arthurian Cycle; villains; Mordred.

RESUMO: Personagem das lendas Arturianas, Sir Mordred, filho e sobrinho do Rei Artur, é um dos mais famosos vilões da imaginação europeia. Contudo, a sua reputação nem sempre foi tão pérfida. De facto, é apenas em 1136, na obra *Historia Regum Britanniae*, que Geoffrey of Monmouth identifica Mordred como o traidor por detrás da destruição de Camelot e da morte de Artur. No entanto, Monmouth descreve Mordred enquanto sobrinho do Rei. O *Ciclo da Vulgata* foi, na verdade, o primeiro a introduzir a ideia de que Mordred é filho de Artur com uma das suas irmãs. Assim, a perversão deste foi explicada pela união imoral da qual resultou. Todavia, pode o comportamento de Mordred ser desculpado devido às circunstâncias do seu nascimento? Começando por analisar textos-chave medievais, este artigo visa examinar a história infame de Mordred, tentando compreender como e porquê tem este sido descrito enquanto um vilão. Além disso, serão focadas adaptações modernas. O que mudou no que diz respeito a representar vilões e que características medievais foram mantidas?

Palavras-chave: Literatura inglesa medieval; Ciclo Arturiano; Vilões; Mordred.

‘But ye have done a thyng late that God ys displesed with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme.’ (Malory 32)

Merlin’s prophecy in Sir Thomas Malory’s most famous retelling of Arthurian narrative, *Le Morte D’Arthur* (1485), seems to set the fate of the child born between Arthur and one of his half-sisters: the infant is to become the destroyer of Camelot. King Arthur’s nephew and son, Sir Mordred (also known as Medrawd, Modred or Medraut) is possibly one of the most famous villains of European imagination. Today a symbol of treason and deceit, Mordred has frequently been ignored by the academia who have found in the remaining Knights of the Round Table a source of greater (and perhaps, more worthy) interest. However, Mordred’s reputation has not always been so black with crime and in Welsh and Scottish tradition there is no record of his betrayal until the 15th century.

The first reference to Mordred’s double-crossing character was made in *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*, 1136) by Geoffrey of Monmouth who identified Mordred as the traitor behind Camelot’s downfall and King Arthur’s death. Nevertheless, the author still depicts Mordred as Arthur’s nephew and not his incestuous offspring. A century later, the writers of the *Vulgate Cycle* would further worsen Mordred’s betrayal by making him Arthur’s son and a child of one of the King’s sisters. A question, though, remains: why has Mordred become such a notorious villain? Can this unnatural union explain his wickedness? “Mordred: From Traitorous Son to Prodigious Child-Druid” aims to answer these questions by taking a closer look at some of the English and French medieval sources in which Sir Mordred plays a relevant role. By doing so, this paper means to trace back a centuries-old character and shed some light on his dark history. Finally, more modern representations of Mordred will also be considered.

Mordred: Treacherous Kin

Mordred’s first recorded appearance is in the *Annales Cambriae* (*The Annals of Wales*)¹, a complex set of Cambro-Latin chronicles from no later than the 10th century. Under the year 93 (537 AD) there is a reference to the battle of Camlann “in which Arthur and Medraut fell: and there was plague in Britain and Ireland” (*Annales Cambriae*). However, this report provides little help as

¹ Despite its name, the *Annales Cambriae*, which cover the time between 447-954 AD, report events that took place in Ireland, Cornwall, England, and Scotland, among others. Besides Year 93, the *Annales* also mention King Arthur in Year 72 (516 AD) that recalls the battle of Badon during which Arthur carried the Cross of Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and nights, leading the Britons to victory.

to what Mordred's role in such battle was for it remains unclear whether a) he and Arthur fought against each other; b) if they were blood-related; and c) what the circumstances of the battle were. A full account of Mordred's actions is actually only given much later in *Historia Regum Britanniae*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, in which the author, for the first time, makes him Arthur's double-crossing knight and the one responsible for the fall of the Round Table. In Monmouth's retelling, Sir Mordred is the son of King Lot and Anna or Anne, Arthur's sister, a fact that might justify why Arthur decides to leave him in charge of his kingdom and wife, Guinevere². According to this author, when Arthur leaves to Rome, intent on becoming Emperor of the Roman Empire, he entrusts the rule of his land and spouse to Mordred who loses no time in seizing the throne and marrying Guinevere³,

[...] he [Arthur] had news brought him that his nephew Mordred, to whose care he had entrusted Britain, had by tyrannical and treasonable practices set the crown upon his head; and that Queen Guanhumara, in violation of her first marriage, had wickedly married him (Monmouth 189).

Hence, even Mordred's early history seems tainted by incest. In *Historia Regum Britanniae* he may not be Arthur and his sister's son, but by wedding his uncle's wife, Mordred is definitely engaging in an unacceptable or taboo marriage. The reasons for such treachery remain unknown and unexplained. Why does Mordred decide to double-cross Arthur? Can it solely result from Mordred's greed and power hunger? Or was he induced into it? Was the nephew love-struck by his aunt Guinevere?⁴ Such questions are unanswered, but from this point onwards Mordred's role as a most disloyal knight and traitor is established in Arthurian narratives – a trait highlighted by French authors who will also introduce Arthur's incestuous relationship with one of his sisters.

In the early 13th century, the *Vulgate Cycle* (c. 1215-1240) altered Mordred's role in Arthurian tales by adding a greatly controversial feature to his history

² The son of a sister was of key importance for Celtic people, in whose myths Arthurian narratives are considered to originate from, because the legitimacy of a bloodline was ensured by women, and not by men. Therefore, a chieftain's or a king's nephew was often held in greater honor than his own son which is why it is understandable that, having no children, Arthur should leave the rule of the kingdom to one of his sister's sons. See Sir Gawain and King Arthur's relationship in the poem *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*.

³ Mordred seems here to fulfill the role later played by Lancelot, becoming the Queen's lover and actually marrying her during Arthur's absence.

⁴ Following this line of thought, one might also wonder as to why Arthur chooses to leave Mordred in charge of the kingdom and not Gawain who is too his sister's son and a most loyal knight.

– he became Arthur’s son by one of his half-sisters⁵. There are two known versions of Mordred’s incestuous conception in the *Vulgate Cycle*, one in which Arthur sleeps with an anonymous sister, believing her to be a fair maiden from Ireland and a second that reports how Arthur, as a young squire, falls in love with King Lot’s wife (his half-sister) and, pretending to be her husband, goes into her bed. In both accounts, though, neither Arthur nor his sister are aware of the close affinity between them and often the act remains of little importance to the story’s development. In *King Arthur’s Enchantresses*, Carolyn Larrington claims, “The *Vulgate Cycle* makes no direct reference to the intercourse between Arthur and his sister as incestuous. Merlin makes no prophecies about the consequences of Arthur’s desire, merely informing his protégé that one of Lot’s sons is actually his” (130). Therefore, Mordred’s parentage remains of small consequence to his character and one cannot reasonably argue that he has somehow grown to become an evil knight because of the circumstances of his birth. Nevertheless, such theory should not be disregarded for it might not be completely incorrect.

Succeeding the *Vulgate Cycle*, the *Post-Vulgate Cycles* (c. 1230-1240) emphasized the liaison between the King and his half-sister, making it blameworthy. In the *Post-Vulgate Suite de Merlin*⁶, for instance, their sexual encounter is done unknowingly but bares immediate consequences to Arthur’s kingdom since it prompts the monstrous Questing Beast – a result of incestuous and unrestrained sibling desire. In addition, upon knowing the truth, Arthur attempts to kill Mordred which only makes him more at fault since “not only does the king plunge irremediably into sin on account of his lust, he compounds his crime by attempting to kill the infant Mordred, in a classic incest-and-exposure narrative” (Larrington 131).

⁵ Traditionally, Queen Morgause is Igraine’s daughter by her first husband, often identified as Gorlois, the Duque of Cornwall, and, therefore, Arthur’s half-sister. She is also associated to some specific features: she is King Lot of Orkney’s wife and mother to Gawain and Mordred. However, Morgause’s incestuous relationship with her brother, described in works such as *Estoire du Merlin*, *Suite de Merlin*, and of course *Le Morte D’Arthur*, has led many authors to increasingly depict her as a vicious and wicked character. Nowadays, some novels and film adaptations have often made Morgan le Fay, also Arthur’s sibling and acknowledged nemesis, Mordred’s mother, a possible attempt at simplifying the Arthurian legends for modern audiences.

⁶ In *The Suite de Merlin*, shortly after Arthur’s coronation, the Queen of Orkney comes for a formal visit to court with her four sons. According to this account, both she and Arthur are ignorant of their blood ties; the King falls deeply in love and, before she returns to her husband, they sleep together. As a result, the Questing Beast, which runs wild throughout Arthur’s lands, is set forward. Later on, Merlin reveals the truth behind Arthur’s parentage and, thus, the incestuous nature of his intercourse with the Queen of Orkney, prophesizing that their child will put the kingdom in grave danger. The King then decides that the best option is to kill infant Mordred, a decision clearly refused by Merlin who claims for the boy’s innocence. Notwithstanding, Arthur decides to take hold of all May Day babies (an episode now known as the “May Day Massacre”) and sets them adrift in a boat. Mordred escapes such fate and is raised by a knight, Nabur.

Clearly there is a crucial change in how Mordred's birth was viewed by the authors of the *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate Cycles*, the question, then, is why? If earlier the act itself was mostly ignored, how did Arthur and his sister's night of passion become so relevant? One possible explanation may be related to the progressive Christening of the Arthurian Cycle. In fact, by the 12th century, several Christian elements, such as the Holy Grail episode, had been introduced⁷. Considering that incest is regarded as a great sin, forbidden by the all-powerful Christian God, it should not come as a surprise that Arthur would have to be punished for such an unholy act. In addition, at the same time that Arthur is seen as more at fault and his actions foretell an unhappy ending for Camelot, Mordred's character also becomes darker. It seems the more importance is given to the incest factor, the more the knight's wickedness is stressed. Sir Mordred becomes false, treacherous, and greedy; he has his mind set on being king and wishes to destroy Arthur who stands in his way to achieve all that should be his by right; after all, is Mordred not the king's son? Interestingly, according to Alan Lupack in *Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* various Scottish chronicles support this theory claiming that when fighting Arthur, himself a bastard son (for his father Uther was not married to Igraine when he lay with her), Mordred is merely demanding what is his:

Although Mordred is generally presented as a villain in medieval and modern literature, a number of Scottish chronicles suggest that because of Arthur's illegitimate birth he had no right to the throne and that Mordred, in rebelling against him, only claimed what was rightfully his (Lupack 462).

In Wales, Mordred (Medrawd) continued being an ambiguous figure at least until the 15th century. In *Trioedd Ynys Cambriae* (*The Welsh Triads*)⁸, he is brought up twice, in Triad 54 and Triad 59.

⁷ In the 12th century, Europe's feudal system suffered great changes. Noblemen and the knights who served them achieved a status similar to that of monarchs and slowly as their power increased so did their importance in Arthurian narratives. As a result, knights started having more relevant and active roles in many of the adventures, while the king became a passive character. Arthur, who in the tales of *The Mabinogion* was portrayed as a nearly supernatural warrior, turned into an inactive monarch. At the same time, a new concept of knighthood, in tune with the moral ideals of the Catholic Church, was formed which led to a clear division among Arthur's knights. On the one hand, there were imperfect knights, embodying the vices of Camelot (such as Gawain); and, on the other hand, the ones who were devoted to Christ (like Galahad).

⁸ *Trioedd Ynys Cambriae* is a collection of triadic sayings that recount characters, events and places in Welsh history. The most well-known translation of the Triads was done in 1961 by Rachel Bromwich who resorted to different manuscripts, but especially to *Peniarth 16*, the oldest document to contain the original texts. According to Bromwich, the Triads started being compiled at some point in the 13th century and kept being updated well into the 15th century. Today, most scholars believe the Triads were used in the training of the Celtic bards, helping them memorize stories that are now, because they were lost or never written down, unknown.

Triad 54, “Three Unrestrained Ravagings of the Isle of Britain”, mentions that the first ravaging in Britain occurred when Mordred came to Arthur’s court at Celliwig, in Cornwall, and not only did he eat all the food and drink, but also dragged Guinevere (Gwenhwyfar) from her royal chair and stuck a blow upon the queen. The second ravaging happened when Arthur went to Mordred’s court and he too left no food or drink.⁹ Triad 59, “Three Unfortunate Counsels of the Isle of Britain”, lists as the third ill-fated counsel the threefold dividing by Arthur of his men with Mordred at Camlann.¹⁰ Due to the concise nature of these triads much is left unclear and the questions faced when looking at the *Annales Cambriae* remain since, although Triad 54 does seem to reveal some antagonism between Mordred and Arthur, their relationship is undisclosed.

Another Welsh source, “The Dream of Rhonabwy”, part of the collection entitled *The Mabinogion*,¹¹ also mentions the battle of Camlann, providing a clearer account. According to this prose tale, enmity erupts between King Arthur, a nearly giant-sized man in this account, and his nephew because of Iddawg, the Churn of Britain, who inflames Mordred’s wrath and, consequently, starts the battle of Camlann:

[...] ‘I am called Iddawg the Churn of Britain.’ ‘Chieftain, why are you called that?’ asked Rhonabwy. ‘I will tell you. I was one of the messengers at the Battle of Camlann between Arthur and his nephew Medrawd. I was a high-spirited young man, so eager for battle that I stirred up bad feeling between them: when the Emperor Arthur sent me to remind Medrawd that Arthur was his uncle and foster-father, and to ask for peace lest the sons and nobles of the island of Britain be killed, though Arthur spoke as kindly as he could I repeated his words to Medrawd in the rudest possible way. Thus I am called Iddawg the Churn of Britain, and that is how the Battle of Camlann was woven. (*The Mabinogion* 180-181)

This passage is quite interesting for two important points. First, even though the above paragraph does suggest hostility between Arthur and Mordred, the

⁹ The third unrestrained ravaging occurred when Aeddan, the Wily, came to the court of Rhydderch, the Generous, at Alclud and left neither food nor drink or beast alive.

¹⁰ Triad 59 lists as the first unfortunate counsel of the Isle of Britain, “To give place for their horses’ fore-feet on the land to Julius Caesar and the men of Rome, in requital for Meinlas; and the second: to allow Horsa and Hengist and Rhonwen into this Island; [...]” (*Trioedd Ynys Cambriae*).

¹¹ *The Mabinogion* is a collection of old prose tales which have originated from Celtic oral tradition. Even though experts have not yet reached an agreement as to the exact dates, *The Four Branches of The Mabinogi* are believed to have been written in the second half of the 11th century while the remaining texts were probably added later on. First translated into English by Lady Charlotte Guest, responsible for introducing “Taliesin” into the collection, *The Mabinogion* only became widely known in the 19th century.

battle of Camlann (which, as mentioned, is also recorded in the *Annales Cambriae* and in the *Trioedd Ynys Cambriae*) seems to result not from their mutual hatred, but from Iddawg's interference, who is held in charge of rousing the animosity between both parties. Second, Mordred is not only identified as Arthur's nephew, but is his foster-son. Since Arthurian narratives were taken to French territory by Celtic-descendant *conteurs* (after the Anglo-Saxon invasion), it might be possible to argue that this account led French authors to presume Mordred was actually Arthur's child. Such theory, though, seems feasible since the reasons as to why Sir Mordred was turned into Arthur's (incestuous) son are unlikely to ever be completely explained. Nevertheless, it is clear that a drastic change happens when one moves from chronicles to romances.

By the 15th century, when Sir Thomas Malory writes one of the most influential retellings of Arthurian legend, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Mordred's very existence produces disorder and evil. In addition, Malory's version acknowledges that the King and his sister Morgause, King Lot's wife, consciously agree upon committing adultery:

[...] Kyng Arthur rode unto the cité of Carlyon. And thydir com unto hym Kyng Lottis wyff of Orkeney [...] she was a passynge fayre lady. Wherefore the Kyng caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her. And so they were agreed, and he begate upon hir Sir Mordred (Malory 29-30).

Although both are unaware of their blood ties at this point, it is undeniable that Arthur and Morgause are guilty of betraying Lot. In addition, while the authors of the *Post-Vulgate Cycle* had conceived the King and his sister's sexual encounter to be done unknowingly (on Morgause's side, at least) or as a folly of youth, Malory turned it into a conscious agreement between two adults who, albeit unaware of the consequences of their actions, can hardly be considered innocent. Moreover, in line with the *Post-Vulgate Cycle*, in Malory's version, after knowing the child "shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme" (32), Arthur places all May Day children in a boat that eventually sinks, killing all but the infant Mordred. The young monarch's act is most definitely unacceptable by the knightly code and the Christian ideals so intertwined with Arthurian narratives and stands as a bad omen for the beginning of Arthur's reign. Interestingly, in spite of Merlin's prophecy, Sir Mordred's role in the story's development is rather small. Indeed, in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the fall of the Round Table and Camelot's destruction begins with internal conflicts amongst the knights, caused namely by the Orkney clan. The ultimate rupture occurs when Gawain¹² and his brothers, including

¹² Sir Gawain is often portrayed as Arthur's nephew and Morgause and Lot's son. In earlier accounts, such as in *Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is Arthur's best knight, most gallant

Mordred, set a trap in order to catch Lancelot in Queen Guinevere's chambers. Fighting to escape, the most valiant knight of the Round Table kills Gawain's youngest (and most worthy) brother, Gareth, starting off a war. Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, though, is quickly forgotten; the most important is for Gawain to avenge Gareth's death, "But the Freynsh booke seyth Kynge Arthur wolde have takyn hys queen agayne and to have bene accorded with Sir Launcelot, but Sir Gawayne wolde nat suffir hym by no maner of meane" (Malory 662). To a certain extent, then, Guinevere's adultery becomes an excuse for an anticipated end sensed by Mordred who decides to make his final move. Similarly to what happens in *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Arthur departs England, leaving the crown to his nephew/son that soon proclaims himself king and wishes to marry Guinevere:

As Sir Mordred was rular of all Inglode, he lete make lettirs as thoughe that they had com frome beyonde the see, and the lettirs specified that Kynge Arthur was slayne in batayle with Sir Launcelot.

Wherefore Sir Mordred made a parlemente, and called the lordys togythir, and there he made them to chose [hym] Kynge; [...] he toke Gwenyver, and seyde plainly that he wolde wedde her [...] (Malory 679)

The reasons for Mordred's betrayal are hardly made clear by Malory. Does he try to seize the throne merely out of greediness? Is it because he hates his father? The same questions which lingered over Geoffrey of Monmouth's text remain unanswered by Thomas Malory. On the one hand, it might be possible to claim that Sir Mordred is wicked and can only be a villain on account of his incestuous birth which, in an increasingly Christianized text, seems to be a plausible answer. On the other hand, being the son of two siblings, Mordred naturally becomes an inappropriate hero. In a period when a knight's lineage was of key importance, could his existence be otherwise depicted? Furthermore, Mordred seems to become evil because it was prophesied that he would be so. Merlin's forewarning of his betrayal casts a shadow over the character's development – the wizard's prediction itself lays a curse upon Sir Mordred; he must fulfill the role destined to be his. Notwithstanding, whether one accepts such explanation, it is undeniable that the tradition which turned Mordred into a treacherous and twisted character provides a foundation for later authors.

Following the Renaissance, and after centuries of enormous popularity, the interest in Arthur and his knights waned. It was only in the 18th and 19th century that a renewed interest in medieval manuscripts and culture recovered many of the texts on the Arthurian cycle. However, it was only in the 20th

and courteous, but as narratives progressed, especially after Lancelot was introduced into the Arthurian Cycle, he became a womanizer, jealous, and unfaithful.

century that Sir Mordred's role as a major villain was established, becoming, along with Morgan Le Fay, Arthur's killer and one of his greatest nemesis.

Modern Mordred: "Sin coming home"

Over the 20th century the adventures of the Knights of the Round Table became extremely popular and by the 1970s the medieval revival produced throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th had been assimilated by literature and the film industry. Myths (and Arthurian ones in particular) were at the center of the youth culture. About a decade later, in the 80s, neomedievalism was already a part of European and American culture, transforming not only medieval studies, but popular culture as well.

The 20th century produced numerous important novels that further explored Sir Mordred's character and somewhat provided a greater insight into his motivations. Of a vast number of works of fiction, this paper will focus on three. They are: *The Once and Future King* (which started being published in 1938), by T.H. White; *The Mists of Avalon* (1982), written by Marion Zimmer Bradley; and *The Wicked Day* (1983), by Mary Stewart.¹³ These three works were chosen for they a) stand as some of the most popular Arthurian retellings by modern authors, having tremendously contributed to our contemporary outlook on Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table; b) provide different perspectives on a centuries-old character; and, most importantly, c) offer a relevant and detailed account of Mordred's actions, feelings, and motives, which are often ignored by other narratives.

The internationally acknowledged collection *The Once and Future King*, by T.H. White¹⁴ has been very influential in recreating the Arthurian tale to a younger audience; in it Mordred's birth is the result of Arthur's seduction by his half-sister, Queen Morgause of the Out Isles. Even though White makes it clear that Morgause had planned to dazzle young Arthur with her beauty, he makes no excuses for the King and ascertains that such a union is "sin coming home to roost" (335). White's Mordred is albino, hunchbacked, which makes him unsuitable for knightly prowess, unattractive, too clever for his own good, sexually ambiguous and continuously alludes to Arthur trying to drown him on May Day, "I don't think it is any good complaining about

¹³ Amongst the many novels written on the Matter of Britain, there are: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain, (written in 1889, it is considered the first modern narrative on King Arthur); *Taliessin Through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) by Charles Williams; *Arthur Rex: A Legendary Novel* (1978) by Thomas Berger; *Small World* (1984) by David Lodge; and *The Pendragon Cycle* (started in 1987) by Stephen Lawhead.

¹⁴ *The Once and Future King* collection is composed of five books, *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (previously entitled *The Witch in the Wood*), *The Ill-Made Knight*, *The Candle in the Wind* and *The Book of Merlyn* (published post-mortem). The books retell Arthur's childhood and follow his rule over the kingdom of Camelot, focusing on different characters and their influence upon Arthur.

happened in the past,' he said gloomily. [...] 'It may have happened long ago, but that doesn't alter the fact that Arthur is my father, and that he turned me adrift in a boat as a baby'" (White 563).

His father's attempt to kill him is presented as reason enough for Mordred's hatred, but White also shows that the character's perception and psychology have been warped by Morgause's influence. It is she, "the Queen of Air and Darkness" as the author names her, who concocts Mordred's birth in order to destroy Arthur. After his mother dies, Sir Mordred is on the verge of madness, causing the eventual downfall of Arthur and the entire kingdom of Camelot. Nevertheless, White does provide something most medieval accounts do not: a plausible motivation behind Mordred's hate for Arthur. It is naturally possible to argue in favor of Arthur's innocence when it comes to Mordred's conception (even though White does not), but it seems quite obvious that the King's attempt to murder his infant son cannot be blameless. While one cannot ignore the extent to which Morgause's hatred influenced her son, his feelings of rejection and vengefulness are, notwithstanding, credibly explained.

Decades later, Marion Zimmer Bradley wrote *The Mists of Avalon*,¹⁵ providing another outlook into Sir Mordred, but focusing mostly on Morgaine or Morgan le Fay whom the author identifies as the knight's mother. In Bradley's account, Vivienne, the Lady of the Lake of Avalon, uses her niece, Morgaine, and her nephew, Arthur, to produce a child born from the royal line of Avalon – Mordred. By doing so Vivienne aims to use the infant as a tool to ensure Arthur's unification of Britain and bring the Old Religion out of the mists it had been drifting into as a result of the religious intolerance brought about by Christian priests. However, Morgaine rebels against Vivienne and turns to her other aunt, Morgause, the Queen of Orkney, who becomes the child's foster-mother. Like in White's retelling, Mordred, here a handsome, intelligent, but calculating young man, is manipulated by a power-driven Morgause that sees in him a means to bring down Arthur and make herself High Queen. In fact, other than the love, albeit obsessive, for his foster-mother and foster-brother Gareth, his personal hero, Mordred has few redemptive features and appears to have little will of his own. Most of his actions seem to serve the purpose of other characters: he goes to Avalon to be trained as a bard, because Vivienne wants him to; he helps expose Guinevere and Lancelot's affair to please his foster-mother; he rebels against Arthur in the name of Avalon, a cause that

¹⁵ *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) is divided into four novels, *Mistress of Magic*, *The High Queen*, *The King Stag* and *The Prisoner in the Oak*. Marion Zimmer Bradley's work stands out from other Arthurian novels for it is one of the first texts written from the female characters' perspective, particularly Morgaine (also known as Morgan le Fay), Arthur's half-sister.

is hardly his, and when all he truly loves finally dies (or is killed by him),¹⁶ Mordred has nothing else but his animosity towards both parents:

‘[...] Why have you become my enemy? Why, my son?’

‘Do you truly believe that I was ever anything else, my father?’ He spoke the word with the greatest bitterness. ‘For what else was I begotten and born, but for this moment when I challenge you for a cause that is no longer within the borders of this world? I no longer even know why I am to challenge you – only that there is nothing left in my life but for this hatred’ (Bradley 997).

As in *The Once and Future King*, Mordred has good reasons for disliking both Morgause and Arthur. On the one hand, his mother left him to Morgause’s care, hardly takes the time to know him as an adult, and ultimately never loves him like a son. On the other hand, although Arthur does acknowledge him as his child, the King only considers the possibility of leaving Mordred the throne once Galahad dies in the Grail Quest. Interestingly, both in White and Bradley’s narratives, Mordred seems to be a tool for Arthur’s female opponents – a means to an end. In the two novels he is chiefly used by Morgause, who always fulfills the mother-role (whether she is his birth-mother or not), to try to overthrow Arthur and make herself Queen. Simultaneously, these depictions also transform the knight’s relationship with his father because, since Mordred’s motivations are not his own, they distance him from the actions carried out against Arthur.

Finally, Mary Stewart’s *The Wicked Day*¹⁷ is the only of the three works which is nearly exclusively dedicated to rehabilitating Mordred, making him an intelligent, ambitious, resourceful, quick-thinking and an honorable knight – features that help him rise to a position of trust at the court and become a worthy successor to Arthur. In *The Wicked Day*, Mordred grows up with foster parents on an isolated island in Orkney, until his birth-mother Morgause decides to get involved in rearing him, only to use the child as a tool against her half-brother and his father, King Arthur. However, unlike the two previous re-writings, Stewart’s Mordred respects Arthur as a father and king, suspecting his mother’s scheming ways and his brothers’ maliciousness.

¹⁶ Throughout the narrative, Mordred is responsible for killing some of his loved ones. He convinces Gareth to join him and his brothers, Morgause’s sons, in exposing Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair, which will lead to Gareth’s death and accidentally kills Niniane, his lover and a priestess from Avalon.

¹⁷ Mary Stewart’s quintet of novels includes *The Crystal Cave*, *The Hollow Hills*, *The Last Enchantment*, *The Wicked Day*, and *The Prince and The Pilgrim*. In the first three works, Stewart mostly covers Merlin’s life, from his childhood years as the bastard son of a Welsh princess to King Arthur’s tutor and prime wizard-seer. In the fourth book, *The Wicked Day*, the author depicts Mordred’s growth and eventual battle with his father. Finally, the last novel, *The Prince and The Pilgrim*, focuses more closely on the quest for the Holy Grail by a prince, Alexander, and a pilgrim, Alice.

Nevertheless, he is destined to kill Arthur, like Merlin prophesied, in the battle of Camlann, an element which brings emotional depth to the story for it provides the reader insight into Mordred's inner struggle against the knowledge he will someday be responsible for the death of his own father. *The Wicked Day*, thus, delves into whether this character is the villain he has generally been portrayed to be or the victim of fate, an idea that suggests the already mentioned possibility of Mordred simply playing a role destined to be his.

Much as literature, the film and television industry became seduced by the adventures and misadventures of Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, producing what Kevin J. Harty has called "Cinema Arthuriana".¹⁸ Ever since the beginning of the 20th century and almost since cinema was invented, there have been films based on the Arthurian Cycle. Nevertheless, although filmmakers and TV directors always made it all too clear that Mordred (or possibly Morgan le Fay) is the villain of the story, most avoid his incestuous birth. In the article "Will the 'Reel' Mordred please stand up?", Michael Torregrosa distinguishes two different traditions when it comes to portraying Mordred on the big or small screen: one, which ignores Arthur's sexual encounter with his half-sister, depicting Mordred as the villain without any further explanation; and another that accepts the incest factor, using it to give the female adversaries a chance to interfere in Arthur's kingdom, "Filmmakers either avoid Arthur's possible incest and feature Mordred as the primary villain of the film, or they accept the issue of incest to provide an opportunity for the film's female antagonists to exact their revenge on others" (199). Throughout the last century and the current one, several motion pictures¹⁹ were dedicated to the tales of Arthur and his knights, however this paper will only focus on three that have most significantly contributed to Mordred's portrayal. They are: *Excalibur* (1981), and two more recent TV adaptations, *The Mists of Avalon* (2001) and *Merlin* (2008 to present).

Excalibur,²⁰ directed by John Boorman, stands out from other Arthurian based movies for it is, probably, one of the best screen adaptations ever made. Boorman's vision is loosely based on Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and

¹⁸ The term "cinema arthuriana" was coined by Kevin J. Harty as part of the title for a brief filmography published in 1987.

¹⁹ Some of the movies dedicated to King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table are: *Knights of the Round Table* (1953), by Richard Thorpe; *The Sword in the Stone* (1962) by Wolfgang Reitherman; *Camelot* (1967) by Joshua Logan; *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones; Jud Taylor's *Guinevere* (1994); *First Knight* (1995) by Jerry Zucker; and Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004).

²⁰ *Excalibur*'s screenplay was written by Rospo Pallenberg and John Boorman. Alex Thomson was the director of photography, category to which the film was nominated for an Academy award in 1982. Nigel Terry plays King Arthur, Nicol Williamson Merlin, Helen Mirren Morgana and Robert Addie Mordred.

portrays Arthur's life since his conception (via Merlin's magical interference) to his death at Mordred's hands. In *Excalibur*, Mordred is conceived when Morgana, using Merlin's Charm of Making,²¹ takes on Guinevere's shape and deceives her half-brother, Arthur, into sleeping with her. The child's birth becomes a curse upon Arthur and Camelot, bringing about chaos and mayhem. Indeed, the moment he is born a lightning bolt strikes Arthur and the land becomes barren. Raised only by his wicked mother Morgana, Mordred is instilled with hatred against his father and grows to symbolize death and destruction for the Knights of the Round Table, enacting the violence Morgana was, perhaps because she is a woman, unable to carry out. Mordred, thus, becomes her means to bring down Camelot, which makes the witch the leading villain of the story. Consequently, as Torregrosa further comments, it is the female character that controls Mordred's development:

In films like John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) [...] female characters control the development of Mordred, especially by encouraging his hostility towards Arthur. The presentation of Mordred in these films becomes a means of empowering the female antagonist of each film, since these women set out to construct Mordred as their tool to bring about the destruction of Camelot and the hopes that Arthur might bring peace a troubled land (Torregrosa 203).

The same idea seems to be used in the TV series adaptation of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*. Directed by Uli Edel, the series²² follows the text rather closely, portraying Mordred as a villain that is little more than a pawn to Vivienne's and Morgause's personal goals – the first wishes him to become the great king of prophecy who will bring peace to the different religions in Britain while the second merely wants power and the position in court that Mordred, as her foster-son, can ensure. Therefore, even though according to Michael Torregrosa "*Excalibur* is the first film to employ Mordred as a tool" (204), it is certainly not the last. Indeed, in both these adaptations, he is the instrument that Arthur's female opponents use to undermine his rule. Again, as in *The Once and Future King* and *The Mists of Avalon* (the novel), the audience is faced with a distancing between Mordred and his actions since he

²¹ "The Charm of Making is the most powerful spell known by Merlin or any wizard or sorceress in *Excalibur* since it invokes the Dragon. Indeed, this magic is so strong that it can create life itself, but there is always a price to pay for such power, perhaps death. According to Michael Everson on the webpage *Evertypes*, the Charm of Making is an attempt at Old Irish and it can be transcribed like: "*Anál nathrach, orth' bháis's bethad, do chéil dénmha*" – "Serpent's breath, charm of death and life, thy omen of making" (translation provided by Everson)" (Martins 148).

²² The series *The Mists of Avalon* were produced by American cable channel TNT. Anjelica Huston played Vivienne, Julianna Margulies Morgana, Joan Allen Morgause, Edward Atterton Arthur and Hans Matheson Mordred.

(apparently) only turns against Arthur because he is induced to do so by the female characters.

Finally, in the most recent fantasy-adventure TV series *Merlin*,²³ developed by Julian Jones, Jake Michie, Julian Murphy and Johnny Capps, Mordred appears in one of his most interesting forms – as a young druid boy. In his first appearance in *Merlin*, “The Beginning of the End” (Episode 8, Season 1), Mordred seems to be an innocent child with extraordinary powers that was turned over to King Uther Pendragon as a sorcerer, a crime punished with death. While trapped in Camelot, he communicated mostly by telepathy and, though he could not see it, the child was able to sense his master’s execution. Albeit very young, Mordred is declared to be destined to kill Arthur unless Merlin himself allows the boy to die. Disturbed by such revelation, but unable to let the boy be murdered, Merlin, Morgana and Gwen (Guinevere) eventually returned him to the druids, identified in the series as “his people”. Mordred is, nonetheless, revealed to have a dark and vengeful personality. Later on the show, in the episode “The Nightmare Begins” (Episode 3, Season 2), he is seen knocking over, and perhaps killing, Uther’s soldiers that had come to one of the druid’s camp in search of Morgana, whose powers are also starting to reveal themselves. Unlike the previous two adaptations, BBC’s *Merlin* series consciously avoid Arthur’s incest with his sister Morgana, making Mordred a child who will, most likely, grow to hate Arthur for his father’s cruel treatment of those born with some kind of supernatural gift.

In conclusion, it is clear that during the Middle Ages there were two opposing traditions when it came to depicting Mordred. On the one hand, in most romances, and in continental ones in particular, Mordred fulfilled the role of the villain, the traitor who turned against his own kin, his father. However, on the other hand, in Wales and Scotland, Mordred was perceived under a different light and even though some reports admit that he did rebel against King Arthur, they do not seem to blame him for doing so. How then did Mordred become one of the most well-known villains of Arthurian narrative and a symbol of the traitor?

Looking back at the earliest references to Mordred or Medraut, especially at the Welsh and Scottish ones, it is clear there is no foundation that suggests he is a) Arthur’s son, and b) a traitor; so why the change?

To begin with, because Mordred’s first reference is associated to Arthur’s death in the battle of Camlann, in which he performs an unclear role, it is possible that he should be considered his rival. In addition, no other character is mentioned in the *Annales Cambriae* so anyone familiar with these chronicles was likely consider they mention the name of the leaders of the opposing armies.

²³ *Merlin* is a British fantasy series based on the Arthurian legends about Merlin and his relationship with Arthur. Produced by BBC One, the series has actor Colin Morgan as Merlin, Bradley James playing Arthur, Katie McGrath as Morgana and Asa Butterfield depicting Mordred.

Secondly, it is also important to consider that while the *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate Cycles* were being written, there was a growing predisposition for creating characters that embodied certain qualities or flaws. Hence, among others, Lancelot became the nearly perfect knight, Arthur the inactive monarch and Mordred the symbol of treason, of the evil that grows from within the King's court.

Furthermore, an answer to this question also seems to lie in the circumstances of Mordred's birth. By the 13th century Christian values had been integrated into romance which made Mordred's conception by Arthur and one of his half-sisters unacceptable. Born from sin, he could hardly be accepted as one of the heroes. Finally, Merlin's prophecy, which foretells that Mordred shall destroy Arthur and all the knights of his realm, is of key importance to the character's development for it seems to lay a curse upon him – Mordred puts an end to Camelot and its King, mostly because he was always meant to do so.

During the 20th century, and in more recent adaptations, though, Mordred's reasons for hating his father are more intricate than ever before. Modern versions, whether literary or on screen, have made Mordred one of the main villains of Arthurian romance, he is usually wicked, cruel, intelligent and murderous. Nonetheless, contemporary writers have also retold his story and soften his darker side by turning him into a pawn to other character's ambitions, namely Arthur's female opponents. While doing so, these authors are distancing Mordred from his actions and allowing modern readers and/or viewers to consider the character under a different light, perhaps even allowing them to sympathize with Mordred. In fact, as previously shown, the modern Sir Mordred is often portrayed as a tool used to defeat, or at least weaken, King Arthur and bring down his court. For the rest, Mordred remains a man under the burden of a destiny he cannot prevent.

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